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### Cracking the Case on Age-Appropriate Literature

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#### Recommended Citation

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Cracking the Case on Age-Appropriate Literature

Sara Neumann

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### Cracking the Case on Age-Appropriate Literature

Reading is a vital part of education and life, therefore a necessary skill to learn. There are many debated methods as to teaching a child to read, but sometimes overlooked is another important component of the reading process—what a child reads. Books come in a hoard of different styles, genres, and formats, and their contents can be limitlessly varied. While it can be argued that all books are good to read in an appropriate time and place, as far as learning to read is concerned, there are some books that are more appropriate to children than others. Divided into age-level appropriateness, this thesis presents different criteria that may help serve as a guide to choosing appropriate literature for children learning to read. With these criteria in mind, books can be chosen that best support a child’s interests, developing reading skills, and current development to promote comprehension, engagement, and a love for reading.

#### **Leveled Texts vs. Decodable Texts**

When determining what text to use in the classroom, it is first important to know what type of text would most benefit the students at their age and reading level. There are two main types of texts: leveled texts and decodable texts. Both kinds of texts have their advantages and disadvantages, but can be very beneficial when used in the right context. First, you need to know what each of these texts are, when they are useful, and when they are not useful.

Leveled texts are the kinds of books traditionally seen used in classrooms. Books are assigned a certain level of difficulty, and students are tested to see at what level they should read based on their current reading ability and comprehension. As the students advance as readers, they move up in text difficulty. Leveled texts often come in collections in which there are multiple books about a topic with an array of levels of reading so that every child in a classroom

has the chance to read about a topic on their own at their own ability level. These collections will contain many topics, each with a spread of their own leveled books. Students simply have to know their reading level to go and find a book to read. Leveled texts are evaluated based on how long they are, format, plot structure, story complexity, sentence complexity, vocabulary, and targeted audience. Each of these must fit the reader's knowledge of how to read and their level of fluency and comprehension or else the student will fail to read at his or her given level (Pinnell, n.d.).

Due to the fact that leveled texts can be over a variety of genres and contain any kind of content, students can choose what it is that they would like to read about. This is one of the main benefits of leveled texts because students can choose what topic they want to read, and will thus be more motivated to try to read. Oral language is also improved in the use of leveled texts because the writing mimics normal speech and writing patterns (as compared to the phonics-focused writing in decodable texts). This could help to improve a child's fluency. Finally, teachers can also match books to children based on interests and ability when using leveled texts. The teacher can find within his or her collection the type of book that interests a certain child, and then provide a book in that category that matches the child's reading needs (LiteracyPages, 2018).

One drawback of using leveled texts to be aware of is the fact that students can often be put into a box based on their current level of skill. The student is seen as a level rather than a child with learning needs and interests, so reading becomes stagnant and differentiated no more than the level of reading. The system of leveled texts becomes too simplified as students can be grouped only by level and required to all read the same thing instead of getting to select books based off of interest, which disengages students from a text (Glasswell & Ford, 2018).

Additionally, leveled texts can promote the guessing-for-meaning style of reading in which students guess at word or story meaning instead of using decoding skills to understand what the text says. Early leveled texts are often predictable, and children use the predictable writing and illustrations as a crutch. This happens when a text is too difficult for a child and he or she does not have the skills to figure out the true meaning. Students doing this will often be led to false conclusions about the text, which does not lead to reading comprehension (LiteracyPages, 2018).

Decodable texts, on the other hand, are books designed to fit a child's reading level based solely on phonics and high frequency words. The teacher chooses books based on the phonics lessons already taught so that students can decode (or, very basically, sound out) unknown words in order to read them. The books advance with the level of phonics instruction taught. For instance, a teacher may begin using books that only use the short vowel sound because that is all that the students have been taught. But, as the teacher teaches students more about syllable patterns and the different vowel sounds that can be made, the teacher will introduce decodable texts that also include words with vowels that make sounds other than those that are simply short vowels. In doing this, the books read reinforce the phonics taught and help students master the written and oral language code ("Decodable Readers and Text Passages," n.d.).

Decodable texts have their biggest advantage rooted in the fact that they help students to practice their basic understanding of language. Decoding is the process of cracking the alphabetic code, which is something many children struggle with when they cannot match letters with their sounds. Children start off with learning oral language, so when they cannot match the written word to the oral word that they know, they cannot understand what they read. However, with decoding, children gain the confidence to figure out what words are so that they can read more independently with accuracy. This is especially helpful to struggling readers since

decodable texts give them the assurance that they can learn to read, and also help them practice the skills that allow them to understand the written language (Pogorzelski & Wheldall, 2018).

Decodable texts have one major flaw, though—they are often not interesting books. Since the book must follow a certain written pattern using the phonics the child knows, the amount of available words is drastically limited to what fits into that pattern. Additionally, following a strict set of phonics rules often results in awkward sentences that do not fit in with most conversational speech (for example, no one in daily life has actually said, “Pat sat with a cat.”), thus creating a distinction between written and oral language.

When choosing books for a child to read, one must discern the purpose of the reading that the child is doing. If a student is just beginning to learn to read, decodable texts are better so that the child is actually using reading and decoding skills rather than guessing strategies. Leveled texts become a good reading selection for children once they have mastered the decoding skills and are ready to engage the more literary aspects of reading.

### **Vocabulary**

Having a strong vocabulary is essential to a child’s language success. A child cannot speak, read, communicate ideas, or even think about new ideas without having a knowledge of language to express and interpret these concepts. Language development starts from birth as babies hear and experience conversations, and it grows the more and more they are spoken to. The larger a child’s vocabulary storehouse, the greater his or her odds to succeed in school. Daily conversation is approximately made up of a mere three thousand words, though, and children must have a large vocabulary to be prepared for school and reading. The rest of this language learning comes from having been read books and later independent reading of books. It is

through books that vocabulary is expanded (Canizares, n.d.). Books open up children to a world of words that they may never have experienced before, which is essential to growing their vocabulary (Montag, Jones, & Smith, 2015).

A growing vocabulary that occurs through reading is also essential to building reading skills. Children can identify new words by looking at context clues to determine the meaning of a text. This teaches children how to analyze a passage and to fill in blanks, which enhances comprehension and inferential skills. Reading additionally exposes children to different uses of the same word and how it can occur in different contexts. The only way these skills can be learned, however, is by introducing children to a wide range of vocabulary when reading (Duke, n.d., Canizares, n.d.).

The importance of vocabulary by now is obvious, but how to choose the right way to introduce vocabulary in a text is a bit more challenging. Off-limit words in language learning do not exist just because they may appear to be too long, challenging, or rare. Children are capable of learning any word. The way that these vocabulary words are taught and presented is what matters. Firstly, the language and conversation of the book should be natural to what a child typically hears. The reader should not be so focused on trying to understand the dialect or writing style that he or she misses new words completely. The text should sound similar to the kind of daily conversation that the child is exposed to, so that the reader can stay engaged and entertained while still maintaining the ability to learn new words (Chesson, 2018). (An exception: children already proficient in reading with adequate language development are more adept to reading books that sound unlike common language, and therefore can and should read these books without the worry of vocabulary development hindering their comprehension.)

A second feature of a book introducing new words is that it should not overwhelm the reader with a whole new vocabulary. Limit the number of new words in a book so that the child can still completely comprehend what he or she is reading (Lowrey, n.d.). Too many unlearned vocabulary words can overwhelm the reader and limit the child's understanding of the text as a whole. It is better to have a healthy dosage of words that a child already knows that is supplemented with new vocabulary so that the child still has equal opportunity to grow and understand.

Repetition is the third key to building a vocabulary. This can be done through books that repeat the same word over and over again, by intentionally using the word often after learning it, or by the parent/teacher repeating the new word. This constant usage helps to store the new vocabulary in the child's brain and make connections to use it in the future (Lowrey, n.d.).

Finally, it is important to select books that encourage the kind of vocabulary that you are trying to teach. For instance, if the focus of your vocabulary learning is letter/sound correlations, an alphabet book would work well (West Bloomfield Township Public Library, 2017). If you are seeking to teach students onomatopoeia words, find books that use that kind of vocabulary. All that is important is that readers are continuously being pushed to learn new words and grow their vocabulary.

The vocabulary used in the books chosen to teach a child to read should be adequate to the child's reading proficiency, but should also teach the child new words. Vocabulary is essential to language success, therefore it should receive consideration when planning reading selections.



## Illustrations

Illustrations are an important factor in children's books, whether they appear as the picture on the cover, the graphic by a new chapter, or images on a page. They always add to the book in a way that is to help with understanding. Any genre of book can use illustrations, from instructional text books to fairytale stories. Illustrations can be beneficial to people of all ages and interests since their purpose is to enrich the text ("Drawing on Success: The Importance of Illustrations," 2014).

Books with more print rather than pictures usually use the illustrations as a means to encourage foreshadowing or interest. Readers can use the cover illustration to guess what a story will be about and whether or not they will find it interesting ("Drawing on Success: The Importance of Illustrations," 2014). Covers and chapter graphics can also serve as tools for foreshadowing as they usually hint at what is to come in the following pages. Children can use these images to grow more invested in their reading and practice predictive skills.

Picture books, on the other hand, use illustrations to serve other purposes. The children who read picture books tend to be beginning readers, and thus the images play more of a role in the reading activity. The images and the text work together to tell the story, rather than just the words on the page. The writing tells a part that is either mimicked by the illustrations or is expanded upon in the images. The story would not be fully formed without the illustrations, which is a key component of a picture book (Feathers & Arya, 2012).

Illustrations in picture books additionally help children understand the text. When readers struggle with vocabulary and unknown words, the illustrations can provide necessary cues to help them comprehend what is being read ("Seeing is Believing - The Benefits of Picture Books

for Building Reading Skills,” 2017). For instance, if the author wrote, “Pam leapt across the room,” and the reader did not have prior knowledge of the word “leapt,” then the illustration of Pam jumping across the den could give the reader the context he or she needed to understand the text. Illustrations can provide visuals to the story as a whole to aid in comprehension, as well. Children can better visualize, contextualize, and examine a story when there are pictures to review when reading and discussing a book (“Seeing is Believing - The Benefits of Picture Books for Building Reading Skills,” 2017).

Another positive component of picture books is the fact that they teach children how to be visual readers. When one is invested in reading, they often turn the story into a mental movie. Illustrations provide stepping stones to help begin forming visuals of what one is reading by modeling this activity. This contributes to greater interest in the text as well, which is the next point.

Illustrations increase readers’ interest. Reading becomes easier and more fun when there are bright, colorful images to look at. Illustrations also increase readers’ confidence in knowing what has been read because there is a visual reinforcement of the text. Therefore, children are more likely to engage and participate in a reading activity because it feels like something that they can do. When a child feels like he or she can accomplish something, he will be more invested. Pictures add another element to text discussions, as well, because of all the other benefits that they add to reading. This draws children even deeper into a text. Because the reader is invested, he or she is more likely to be interested. Finally, illustrations are just fun to look at, and children enjoy bright colors and creative images. With fabulous illustrations, children can sit and invest themselves in a book for hours even when they cannot read because the pictures are

interesting and tell a story themselves (“Seeing is Believing - The Benefits of Picture Books for Building Reading Skills,” 2017).

Finally, illustrations add so much to the story’s telling. Images can set the tone of the story by the colors used, describe the setting without using any words, and create character elements that few words could not (Feathers & Arya, 2012). Dark images or blue tints may lead the reader to conclude that the story is sad, while bright colors could hint at happiness or adventure. As for setting, the book may never state that the story takes place in Tommy’s backyard, but a picture with a mailbox with Tommy’s name on it or Tommy sitting on a swing with his house in the background will tell just as much. The same can happen for characters. The writer may never explicitly say that Sue is a messy girl, but the illustrations may depict her as someone who does not brush her hair or tie her shoes. This could all contribute to the reader understanding why Sue maybe was not liked by the girl who wore a bow every day. These are all things that a picture can tell to save the author hundreds of words that may not be necessary to the telling of the story.

Consider illustrations when choosing the books for a child to read because illustrations can provide important scaffolding a young reader may need, and images may make the difference for a child between a book he or she wants to read and a book that he or she does not. Illustrations can add so much depth and clarity to the story for a child and can really help a story come alive. The needs and interests of the reader should be evaluated in light of illustrations when a book is being selected.

## Format

The format of books can be critical for choosing what is appropriate and captivating for a child to read at his or her given age. Naturally, each book read to a child should have the basic elements of a cover, title page, and left-to-right word reading so that the child can learn simply how books work. But, besides that, books come in all varieties, and some are more suitable for certain ages rather than others. Here, we will look at the different ways to format a children's book.

The earliest format for a child to read is the board book. Board books are the thick books with cardboard-like pages that are suitable for the wear, tear, and chewing of toddlers ("Know the Formats of Children's Books," 2017). These books are almost always short, with little to no storyline. The focus of board books is usually to teach simple concepts, like the alphabet, and to familiarize a young child with the concept of a book. There are many pictures and sometimes puppets, touch-and-feel items, or other multisensory components that engage the young child even more (Edward, 2013).

Next are picture books, which are designed for slightly older children who are less likely to tear apart a book. These use a combination of words and pictures to get the story across to children who might not fully have the concept of reading down yet. Picture books are often short in word count but are large in size to have plenty of room for the images ("Children's and Young Adult Literature: Genre and Formats," n.d.). Picture books have more of a storyline and plot than board books, and usually contain a subject matter that is interesting or relatable to the targeted audience. Picture books can use a variety of mediums to present the illustrations, giving these books a wide range of variation (Edward, 2013).

Early readers, or sometimes called leveled books, are designed for beginning readers who are ready for more words and less pictures—and even some chapters—while maintaining simplicity for easy comprehension (“Children’s and Young Adult Literature: Genre and Formats,” n.d.). Early readers build confidence in the child readers due to the simplicity of the story, word choice, and structure. These books are meant to encourage children in their reading skills in order to give them the courage to try more challenging material in the future (“Know the Formats of Children’s Books,” 2017).

Chapter books are the next step after children have gained confidence in their reading skills. These books become more complex in their sentence structure and plotline, but can also still include some illustrations. Children really dive into these books for the sake of the story rather than just learning how to read and honing those skills (Edward, 2013).

Finally, the last category of books is a mesh of middle grade and young adult. These are chapter books written for an older audience and do not usually include illustrations. The only real difference between these two groups is the targeted audience and maturity of subject matter. This category of book will come in a variety of genres to meet the vast needs of its wide audience. At this point, readers often know what they like to read and are selecting books based off of that rather than difficulty level or readability. The chapters in these books will often be longer than those in chapter books, and the story will be more complex with a more mature storyline (Edward, 2013).

Reading proficiency is important when considering which format of book a child should be reading. Consider a child’s ability and interests when selecting a format, with the purpose of each format in mind. These formats are obviously targeted at certain age and interest levels, and should thus be thought through when determining what a child should read. However, this is not

to say that a child should be limited to one book format as a reader's interest in reading should open the child to a world of reading possibilities, which may include different formats with appropriate scaffolding.

### **Characters**

Characters are essential to any story, and as one may assume, vital to children's books as well. The characteristics of good children's characters are similar to that of any other book, but put on an age-appropriate level. Characters can draw a reader in just as much as the plot or writing style, and when characters are likable and endearing, the reader is more likely to be invested in the story. This can create readers that are all-in to a series simply because they love the main character (Chesson, 2018).

Of the many characteristics that make a lovable children's book character, relatability is probably at the top of the list. Children want to be able to relate to who they read about because then the characters seem more real and the child is emotionally invested. Along with this, these characters set an example to the reader of how to act. These characters experience situations that the child reader may or may not have experienced before. Thus, these experiences and the character's response teaches a child what to do in a given situation. Because of this, the characters should be relatable to the child, but also be relatable to who the child wants to be (Patterson, 2017).

Characters should be alive and lingering in the mind of the reader when the story is over. This means that they should be new, exciting, and memorable. The characters in a children's book should be someone that a child would be interested in (Chesson, 2018). Notable characters such as Hagrid and Matilda are memorable because they are unique and likable, but also

maintain a childlike essence that draws child readers to them (“Best Children’s Book Characters Ever,” n.d.). It is important to know what children are interested in to be able to align a book’s character with a reader. When these two can pleasingly coexist as if they were real life friends, that is when a good book character has been found (Chesson, 2018).

Finally, characters (with all of their uniqueness) should feel real, or as if they could really exist in the place that they are set to exist. This means that these characters should act, feel, and respond as one would expect in normal life. Realistic characters make the story believable to the reader, so that the reader becomes even more invested in the tale (Patterson, 2017).

For each age level, characters should be differentiated to match their targeted audience. Children want to read about characters that interest them, therefore each book for each reading level should align to the kind of person that these specific readers care for and want to be reading about.

### **Plot**

What drives a story is called the plot. Plot is the compilation of events that creates the action—the rise, fall, and climax of a story. For a plot to be convincing and intriguing to a child, it must be understandable and make sense. It must have interesting qualities to arouse a child’s fascination, as well. This can be done through the setting, character, and problems that create the story, because what is central to most stories is the problem and how the main character seeks to solve it. How the character and problem are fleshed out in the setting that they are in contributes to the effectiveness of a story’s plot (Suben, 2008).

With the prominent problem-resolution approach to plot, writers must beware of making the story too straightforward or too complicated. Children’s books should follow a logical

sequence of events while still remaining interesting. This can be done by including smaller problems, surprises, unexpected victories or troubles, etc. throughout the story. These help to create a more dynamic resolution to the problem and add meat to the story. Children's books should also be careful, however, to not let the story become too problem-heavy. A book that is too dark or negative may not be suitable to most children. The hope is that a children's book will teach children a positive lesson or grow them in their love for reading, and with their more delicate emotions, it is important that children read books that have a positive and uplifting conflict resolution (Chesson, 2018).

Different types of children's books tend to have different types of plots. For instance, board books for infants often have little to no plot as these books are usually used to teach basic concepts. As books get longer and more complex to meet the needs of more advanced readers, the plots tend to get more diverse and complex, too ("Book Categories for Children from Picture Books to YA," 2018). Here are the descriptions of plots appropriate per book type:

Picture books: Picture books should jump straight into the action with little background information or build-up (Suben, 2008). The plot should just simply begin since there are only so many pages in a children's picture book. Any background information or elaboration can be evidenced in the illustrations. As for the text, picture books should introduce the conflict and resolve it, without the extra furls of twists and turns.

Early readers: The plot in these books should be straightforward with little distraction. There is more depth to these plots as they contain more characters and dialogue, with a more exciting climax. Early readers should be action-packed and fast paced to keep young readers interested.



Chapter books: With a slower plot and some more development, these books contain many levels of problem and resolution leading up to the main climax. The characters will grow and develop more as they face more challenges and are really fleshed out in the story. Characters will really experience emotion, which will begin to drive the story more than just action. And, as always, a catching introduction and positive conclusion is necessary.

Novels: Novels can come targeted at a variety of ages, ranging from pre-teen to young adult, but the plots all tend to look similarly. These books will contain more characters, more emotion, and more sub-plots. The character's conflict resolution will be less straightforward as he or she faces many problems along the way to the happy ending. The storytelling is a bit slower and contains more descriptions. At the end of these books, characters are fully formed and the storyline is a complete tale of events ("Book Categories for Children from Picture Books to YA," 2018).

Appropriate plot structure will often come with choosing an appropriate format. When selecting books for a child, remember to give thought to how the story is developed to best meet the developmental needs of the reader.

### **Conclusion**

With each of these elements in mind, one can more adequately choose books that meet the needs of child readers. What is central to each of these book characteristics is the reader's ability level and interests. Based on this research, the following lists my recommendations as to the criteria appropriate per school grade level. It should be stated, however, that these recommendations are general, so they may not apply to every child in every classroom. Take into consideration a child's individual reading needs first and foremost.

**Kindergarten:**

Decodable vs. Leveled: Kindergarten students are often in the pre-alphabetic stage when they begin school, which means that they do not yet know the alphabet and sounds associated with it. Therefore, decodable texts are of no help to them. While students are unable to read to themselves and before they gain sufficient knowledge to attempt to read on their own, authentic texts are preferred for these children. As an adult reads these books to these children, they teach book handling skills and the basic structure and elements of a story. Reading these texts expose children to the rich world of literature, which will lead them to the drive to want to read, which will transition them into the decodable texts.

Vocabulary: Since children are mostly being read to at this age, the vocabulary of a book has few restraints as this is an opportunity to grow the listening vocabulary. The science of reading shows that it is more difficult to read a word that is not in the listening vocabulary, so it is important to expose children to a variety of words while they are this age. However, it is also important that readers (or, in this case, listeners) are not overwhelmed with so many new words that comprehension suffers.

Illustrations: Illustrations should tell just as much of the story as the words do for this age group. Since these children do not read on their own yet, the illustrations allow the child to stay invested in the story and help scaffold their understanding. Illustrations are vitally important for maintaining the interest of the audience.

Format: Picture books are the ideal format for children of this age. These books are simple enough for kindergarten children to understand, but also are interesting for them. With a simple

storyline and linear structure, these books are easy to follow. They also tend to involve captivating images and vibrant colors that draw young children in.

Characters: For children just beginning to be exposed to literature, few and simple characters are best in the books for kindergarten students. This does not give excuse for the characters to be boring, though. The characters should be relatable, so that the audience can relate to the story and be drawn in. The characters should also be creative and unique, to be intriguing to the audience. Children are naturally very imaginative, so the characters should draw on that to engage the young mind.

Plot: The plot of books for kindergarten readers should be straightforward and not too problem-heavy so that the story is easily understood and uplifting to the audience. They should start off with the action because young children will quickly lose interest with too much background information. Illustrations should add to the storyline, keeping the story interesting and heightening the main points of the story.

### **1<sup>st</sup> Grade:**

Decodable vs. Leveled: Once children gain familiarity with the alphabetic code, decodable texts are well suited for them. Literary texts can still be useful for exposing children to literature at this stage, but as far as children conducting their own reading, decodable texts are useful. Using these texts, students will practice the reading skills they are learning, which will allow them to grow into better readers.

Vocabulary: Reading is a great opportunity to expand vocabulary, but since readers are just beginning their journey with literature on their own, it is essential that the vocabulary is not too challenging. It is good, then, for books to sound similar to what children are accustomed to

hearing so that they can more easily understand what is read. Additionally, unknown or more challenging words should be supported by context clues or images. Vocabulary can be used in these books to support syllable patters being learned or a specific set of vocabulary the teacher is trying to teach.

Illustrations: The primary purpose of illustrations at this point are to facilitate the reader's understanding. The pictures should be used to help the reader understand the text, as well as give them confidence in their reading by confirming their understanding. The illustrations can teach the reader foreshadowing and inferencing skills, as well, as they no longer exactly mimic the text. As always, illustrations are good for keeping the reader interested, too.

Format: While picture books can still be appropriate for children of this age, early decodable readers are good to introduce at this time to foster reading ability. These books will contain more of a story line and have more developed characters. Early readers are still simple, though, which allows young readers the confidence they need to read books on their own.

Characters: The number and complexity of characters in the books advised to first graders should still be limited, but as with kindergarten audiences, still imaginative and relatable. These characters should resemble someone that the reader can relate to but also someone they aspire to be. Characters should live and explore in a way that is alluring to the reader to draw them even further into the story. However, the characters should do this in a way that positively influences the reader.

Plot: Books for this age should be fast, action-packed, and waste little time. These books tend to be short, so the story needs to be developed and resolved quickly. The central conflict in these books can be more complex, but not too difficult that the resolution is hard to come about.

Creativity and excitement are central to these books for keeping readers engaged. Dialogue can also be used to aid in developing the storyline.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Grade:**

Decodable vs. Leveled: A good mix of decodable and leveled texts are appropriate for this grade level based on students' proficiency in decoding. Students may start the school year reading decodable texts, but as reading skills are mastered, readers can move to leveled texts. From this age onwards, leveled texts are the norm for the rest of elementary due to the fact that decoding skills should be automatic. If they are not, decodable texts can and should still be used to foster reading skills.

Vocabulary: The vocabulary of books for this age level should be appropriately challenging, but not overwhelming. New words should be decodable so that the reader may know what the word is, but they should not dominate the work being read. Books should still sound somewhat similar to the language the child is used to hearing for easier comprehension. Use books at this age level to encourage the kind of vocabulary the teacher wants the students to use, such as reading a book about frogs to teach words like "amphibian."

Illustrations: The books read by second graders will often still contain pictures, but the role of the illustrations will be a bit different from that of books previously read. These books will likely use illustrations less for telling the story and more for enhancing the story. The visuals will provide a means for the children to infer more about what is going on rather than to support the literal text.

Format: Second graders will likely be reading early readers. With their simplistic structure, these books are great for building the confidence and literary skills needed to be a successful reader.

These books, though simple, can sometimes include chapters which will make the transition to chapter books easier.

Characters: Characters should seem real and relatable to the reader, but also be interesting to them. Books for this age level will contain more characters than the books for the previous age levels, so the characters need to be more distinct but equally appealing to this age. Characters should not be too numerous or complex, however, so that the child can still follow the storyline.

Plot: The plot in these books should be exciting, yet straightforward. Some minor twists will not hurt the story, but the telling should remain focused on the main problem and resolution as to not confuse the reader. These books should jump straight into the storytelling rather than overloading with background information.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Grade:**

Decodable vs. Leveled: Leveled texts are more appropriate as students should have mastered reading skills.

Vocabulary: Vocabulary used in books can reflect a wider variety of dialects, but should not overwhelm the reader with too much variation. Books should consistently expand the reader's vocabulary, but as always, not overwhelm the reader. Reading is another great way to expand content-related vocabulary for this age group, as well.

Illustrations: Illustrations will be less frequent in books read by this age level, but not totally extinct. Illustrations are still a great tool for drawing students in, especially during read-alouds or in graphic novels. Illustrations in many books for this level of reader will be for enhancing the story or providing a means of foreshadowing, such as the picture at the start of a chapter.

Format: Early readers may be present, but these children will mostly be moving into chapter books. Chapter books can come in a variety of ways, with a range of complexity. Third graders should choose chapter books that are appropriately interesting and complex based on their reading level. At this level, readers are going beyond just honing their reading skills and moving into reading for enjoyment based on their ability and interests.

Characters: Books for third graders will contain more characters with more complex backgrounds. These characters may even contain background stories, which may be new for the readers. It is important that characters stay relatable and interesting to the child reader, while maintaining a good moral example.

Plot: Still relatively fast paced, these books allow for a bit more plot and character development. Chapter books can take more time developing the story and introducing the characters, setting, and problem. While the previous age-level plots have tended to be on the lighter side, these books can introduce a little bit of darkness, but still want to stay with an overarching positive feel.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> Grade:**

Decodable vs. Leveled: Leveled texts

Vocabulary: Vocabulary for this age group can begin to diverge from common, everyday vocabulary to writing that uses different dialects or a wider span of language. Readers should have all the necessary skills to explore more advanced texts and vocabulary, within the realm of their skill level. Vocabulary for content areas can also be expanded through reading.

Illustrations: Unless a graphic novel or instructional text, illustrations are about non-existent in books for children of this age. Illustrations that are included in literary books are often sporadic and not used to add much meaning to the story.

Format: Chapter books are the tendency of children in fourth grade. These books have a more advanced storyline and plot development, which can be interesting and exciting to a reader. These readers should be able to read fluently and accurately, so the longer texts of chapter books should be fitting.

Characters: Realistic characters should interact in a setting that feels like it could be real with realistic responses. These characters, as always, should be relatable to the reader and someone that they would care about.

Plot: These books will be slower, with more plot development and a greater climax. The characters will face more realistic problems and have more sincere emotions. The complexity of these books increases as the level of the book increases.

### **5<sup>th</sup> Grade:**

Decodable vs. Leveled: Leveled texts

Vocabulary: Readers can begin to explore a larger range of vocabulary and writing styles, which allows their choice of book to be more varied. The vocabulary a child reads at this stage will likely be aligned with their reading level, but should also contain a percentage of words that challenges the reader to grow in word knowledge as well. Content area vocabulary should also be expressed through the books read.



Illustrations: Unless a graphic novel or instructional text, illustrations are about non-existent in books for children of this age. Illustrations that are included in literary books are often sporadic and not used to add much meaning to the story.

Format: Chapter books are the most popular books of fifth grade readers. These books can come in a variety of reading levels and length, which should be considered when choosing a chapter book for your reader.

Characters: Realistic and relatable characters should fill the books of your fifth graders. As these readers grow older, these characters can have an influence on the reader. Therefore, characters should set positive moral examples for the reader.

Plot: Characters and their development become central in these chapter books. The characters' emotions begin to play a part in the story's drive. There are many layers of problem and solution that the main characters must resolve in order to come to a happy conclusion. The story itself is more in-depth and layered than before.

## **6<sup>th</sup> Grade:**

Decodable vs. Leveled: Leveled texts

Vocabulary: Sixth grade students should be proficient in their reading abilities, so vocabulary should be appropriate to their reading level. Words and language used can reflect various dialects, and vocabulary can be more advanced to delve deeper into specific content areas.

Illustrations: Illustrations will not play a major role in sixth grade literature, but can still be vital to understanding informational texts. At this point, readers should not be as reliant on the pictures to understand a text.

Format: Sixth graders should be reading chapter books or young adult novels. These books tend to be longer, with longer chapters and more complex storylines. The content will often be more mature, as well, to be appropriate to the interests of the older reader. Children at this age tend to choose books based more off interest rather than reading level, so the books read are more likely to suit the child's individual preferences.

Characters: Characters should be realistic and intriguing. Since this age range is choosing books based off of their interests, characters will often reflect someone the reader admires or would like to be. Therefore, main characters should be likable but also have an element of being a role model.

Plot: Books for sixth graders will often contain plots that take longer to develop, contain more details and sub-plots, and will generally tell a complete tale of events. The problem and resolution may not be as straightforward as the problems presented can be more complex. The maturity of novels can tend towards more mature plots, so teachers should be aware of what students are reading for appropriateness.

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